

Is Closest Conjunct Agreement superficial? -A corpus study of CCA in French

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In the prescriptive grammar, French is a language where only the resolution rule is possible (Corbett 1991): Masculine and feminine are resolved to masculine, and conjoined elements require a plural. With a corpus study regarding the pre- and post-nominal adjective agreement in the nominal coordination, we would like to show that closest conjunct agreement is quite frequent for both gender and number.

In Frwac (Baroni et al. 2009, 1.6 billion word), we found 32,769 tokens for *Det Adj N1 and N2* and 59,818 tokens for *Det N1 et N2 Adj*. We chose 2500 items for each structure separately and annotated the number and the gender for nouns and adjectives with *Lexique* (New et al. 2001). We removed by hand the examples where the two nouns are co-referential (1a) or where the adjective has the scope for only one conjunct (1b).

(1a) notre partenaire et fabricant allemande
our.SG partner.SG and manufacturer.SG German.SG

(1b) le vice-premier ministre et ministre
the.MSG Deputy-Prime minister.SG and Minister.SG

The result shows that Closest Conjunct Agreement exists in both pre- and post-nominal position for number (2a, 2b) and gender (2c, 2d).

(2a) la législation et réglementation française
the.FSG legislation.FSG and control.FSG French.FSG

(2b) une entière liberté et égalité
the.FSG full.SG freedom.FSG and equality.FSG

(2c) les différentes villes et pays
the.PL different.FSG city.FPL and country.MPL

(2d) les objectifs et caractéristiques essentielles
the.PL objective.MPL and characteristic.FPL essential.FPL

In the examples, the number and the gender of the determiner coincide always with those of the prenominal adjectives. The figures show a stronger preference for CCA in the prenominal position than in the post-nominal position for both number (Fig.1) (effect-size, $r=0.37$) and gender (effect-size, $r=0.40$).

This preference of CCA in the prenominal position can also be seen in other Romance languages, like Portuguese (Villavicencio et al. 2005). This result is consistent with Corbett's (1991) finding that the resolution rules are preferred when the target comes after the controller.

In the theoretical linguistics, it is claimed that Closest Conjunct Agreement is superficial, which happens in the PF level in minimalism (cf. Bhatt and Walkow, 2003, Demonte et al. 2012) or DOM in HPSG (Borsley 2009). We propose that if it is only sensitive to the closest conjunct, its effect should be the same in the prenominal and post-nominal. The CCA must be sensitive to the internal structure because in the prenominal position, the adjective agrees with the highest conjunct while in the post-nominal position with the lowest conjunct.

This study has two consequences: first of all, the CCA is quite frequent, even preferred in French, for both number and gender. Secondly, we show that the CCA is sensitive not only to the closest conjunct, but also to the internal structure of the coordination.

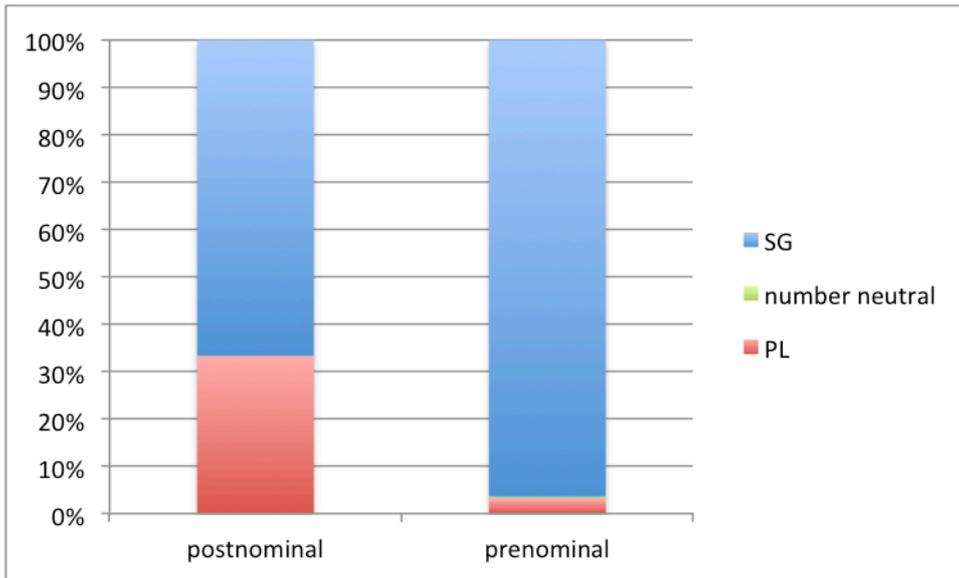


Figure 1. Number Agreement in FrWac

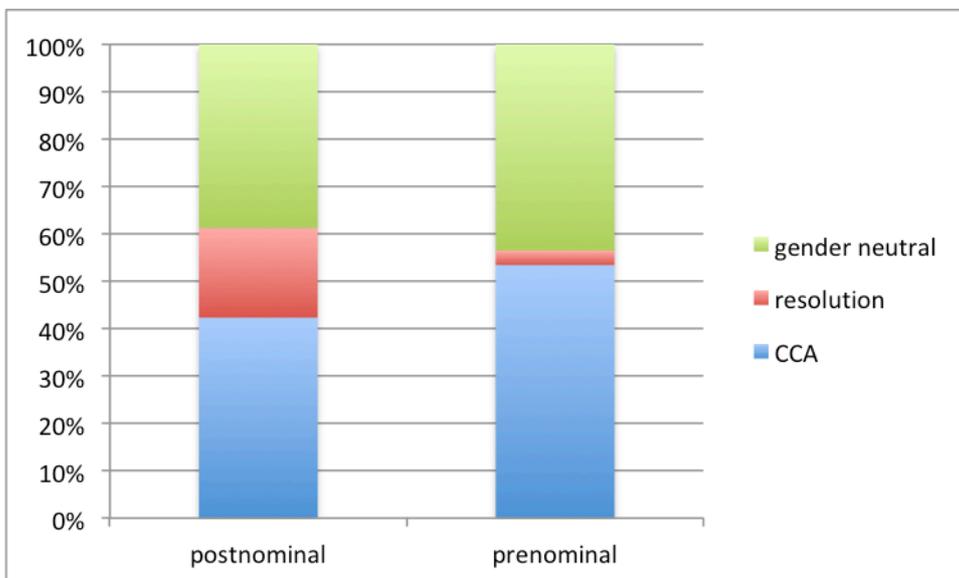


Figure 2. Gender Agreement in FrWac

Selected References:

Bhatt, R. & M. Walkow. 2013. Locating agreement in grammar: An argument from agreement in conjunctions. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 31:951–1013.

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